

## Sharing the trials of recovery

*Tamara Johnson, who just turned 24, is the Western Washington coordinator for Youth 'N Action, a group created to address the needs of people ages 14-24 whose mental or social problems put them at risk.*



By Jerry Large  
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Tamara Johnson made a lot of mistakes.

"I'm one of those people who has to fall on my butt," she said, explaining how she came to be a drug dealer when she should have been sitting in a classroom or working an honest job.

Johnson was brought to my attention because of the work she does now to encourage other young people to fix their lives.

Johnson, who just turned 24, is the Western Washington coordinator for Youth 'N Action, a group created to address the needs of people ages 14-24 whose mental or social problems put them at risk.

YNA assumes people will listen best to their peers who deal with the same issues.

Other organizations are listening too. This week Johnson is in the other Washington, invited as a youth resource for a MacArthur Foundation session on juvenile justice reform.

A big part of Johnson's work is telling her story, so I listened to it in the lobby of the Renton apartment complex where she lives with her boyfriend.

I was glad to hear her say that nothing in her past justifies her poor choices.

Johnson's family lived in a nice house in Federal Way, and her parents worked good jobs at Boeing, until her father started using drugs.

His addiction worsened until the marriage broke apart when Johnson was 4.

The family kept moving for work and other reasons all over King and Pierce counties, Portland, even South Carolina for a while.

That was too much disruption, especially for a child dealing with ADHD. She always felt like an outsider (and sometimes not accepted because she is biracial) until she discovered basketball, which gave her an identity and friends.

"When you play basketball, people support you," she said, "you get respect from your peers."

Surgery ended Johnson's basketball career just as she started high school in Portland. She started hanging out with other marginal kids, smoking and binge drinking.

She was 19 when those friends helped her get into selling drugs around Seattle.

"I was good at it," she said. Her cellphone rang constantly with calls from clients wanting cocaine or ecstasy.

But her mind rang with thoughts of what drugs had done to her family, sometimes it didn't feel good "having people coming up crying and shaking because they need a hit."

The way out began with her boyfriend, Curtis Dickerson Jr., who was ready for a change. He told her about "this white lady" who'd experienced life on the streets, and about her program, Youth 'N Action, where he said they talk about real stuff.

Inspirational, high achievers are easy to dismiss when nothing about them seems connected to your life. People as far along a bad path as Johnson need something else.

Instead of preaching, YNA asks kids to share their expertise and pays them to give it, only \$25 or \$40, but Johnson, who was paid to tell her story to parents and kids at a retreat, said it made her feel respected. That was three years ago.

YNA gets contracts and grants to put on workshops about mental health, violence prevention, how to get government services, among other topics. They give young people's perspectives to public agencies and private organizations and speak at schools.

They also learn from and support each other. YNA meets every two weeks. One meeting is preparing for projects and learning how to help other people, the next is an outing or other fun activity. Gangbangers and drug dealers are welcome as long as they don't bring that mess with them.

Stephanie Lane, the woman who impressed Dickerson, co-founded the group in 1999. She said, "We meet them where they're at and we grow with them. They have as much to give us as we have to give them."

Lane, in recovery from alcoholism and bipolar disorder, earned a master's in social work, and describes her current job with the state as mental-health consumer representative. Johnson and Dickerson started a carpet-cleaning company two years ago; hard work, less money, but more fulfilling.

YNA is still evolving, but its core, treating people with respect and involving them in their own recovery is sound. Even people who have to learn the hard way, can learn.

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